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ABSTRACT

This document discusses several aspects of teaching about religion in the public schools. While religion is an important element in many areas of literature, art, and music, the social studies, especially history and civics, provide the best opportunity for including religion in the curriculum. Teaching about religion in public schools is examined from the standpoint of the Constitution's First Amendment clauses regarding freedom of religion, and the prohibition against promotion of religion by government. While the court decisions do not answer all the questions about the role of religion in the public schools, it is clear that the Supreme Court has not prohibited teaching and learning about religion in social studies courses. It is essential that students be taught about religion in human affairs, because many crises throughout the world require an understanding of religious ideas and their impact on history and contemporary thought. Such concepts as nationalism, imperialism, anticolonialism, slavery and antislavery, freedom of conscience, capitalism, and environmentalism are tied inextricably to religion. Within the past decade, several state agencies and local school districts have created mandates and issued guidelines regarding teaching about religion. Professional educational organizations have provided leadership and support for teachers who want to increase and improve instruction about religion. An example of guidelines is included. Instructional strategies for teaching about religion include natural inclusion, fairness and balance, respect for differences, use of religious scriptures, role playing, rights, responsibilities, and respect. A list of references and resources is included. (DK)

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Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum

by C. Frederick Risinger

In the past decade, educators and policymakers have agreed that public schools should strengthen and improve teaching about religion and its function in human affairs. While religion is an important element in many areas of literature, art, and music, the social studies—especially history and civics—provide the best opportunity for including religion in the curriculum. Several state education departments and local school districts have issued new mandates and guidelines for including religion in the curriculum. Textbook publishers have expanded and improved their coverage of religion, and many supplementary materials are available at both the elementary and secondary levels. For most school systems, the question has changed from "Should we teach about religion?" to "How should we include the study of religion in the curriculum?" Several local, state, and national programs have been established to help teachers and administrators answer this question.

Religion and the Public Schools. Perhaps no issue regarding the public schools is more explosive or divisive than decisions about religion in public life—particularly in the public schools. In the United States, balancing the two clauses in the Constitution's First Amendment—involving individual religious liberty and the prohibition against promotion of religion by government—has remained one of the most persistent dilemmas in public discourse. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the free exercise of religion clause prohibits public schools from violating the religious beliefs of students by compelling them to salute the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance (*West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 1943). The Court has also ruled that the First Amendment's establishment clause prohibits state-mandated religious exercises, such as the formal saying of prayers, even when the prayers are non-demoninational and participation is voluntary (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962 and *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 1985).

Two recent Supreme Court decisions have affected the place of religion in the overall school program. In June 1993, the Court let stand a federal appeals court decision, affirming a Texas school district's policy permitting students to give a "non-proselytizing" prayer at graduation ceremonies, as compatible with the establishment clause of the First Amendment. The Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit said, "A majority of students can do what the state acting on its own cannot do to incorporate prayer in public high school graduation ceremonies" (*Jones v. Clear Creek Independent School District*, 1993). This decision came only a year after the Supreme Court ruled that school officials could not schedule and oversee prayers by religious leaders at graduation ceremonies (*Lee v. Weisman*, 1992). The Court has also ruled that public schools which allow community groups to use school facilities after hours may not bar religious groups from these facilities (*Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District*, 1993).

These decisions do not answer all the questions about the role of religion in the public schools. However, it is clear that the Court has not prohibited teaching and learning about religion in social studies courses.

Teaching about Religion is Important. It is essential that students be taught about religion in human affairs, if they would have a complete education. Much of history, art, music, literature, and contemporary issues have religious roots. Many of the current public debates in this nation and crises affecting many of the world's peoples require an understanding of religious ideas and their impact on history and contemporary thought. The bloody and seemingly insoluble conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina is exacerbated by the historical enmity between Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims in the Balkan region. Such concepts as nationalism, imperialism, anti-colonialism, slavery and anti-slavery, freedom of conscience,

capitalism, and environmentalism are inextricably tied to religion. Religious differences in Northern Ireland have evolved into bitter economic and social class distinctions. And resentment of past political and economic imperialism provides fuel for Islamic fundamentalism from Morocco to Afghanistan.

The Supreme Court consistently has upheld and even recommended that teaching about religion be included in the school curriculum. Justice Robert Jackson argued, "The fact is that, for good or ill, nearly everything in our culture worth transmitting, everything which gives meaning to life, is saturated with religious influences.... One can hardly respect a system of education that would leave the student wholly ignorant of the currents of religious thought that move the world society" (*Illinois ex rel. McCollum v. Board of Education*, 1948). Justice Tom Clark said "that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization" (*School District of Abington v. Schempp*, 1963). In a concurring opinion in the same case, Justice William Brennan held that "whether or not the Bible is involved, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion."

Within the past decade, several state agencies and local school districts have created mandates and issued guidelines regarding teaching about religion. California was one of the first with the publication of the handbook, *Moral and Civic Education and Teaching About Religion* (1988). Firmly grounding instruction about religion in citizenship education, the handbook was published the same year as the *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, K-12* (1988) and was revised in 1991. North Carolina, Utah, and Georgia are among other states that have either state mandates or guidelines on religion in the school curriculum.

Professional educational organizations have provided leadership and support for teachers who want to increase and improve instruction about religion. A report issued by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) maintains, "The proper role of religion in the school is the study of religion for its educational value." Although religion and religious issues cross the lines of traditional disciplines in education, they are particularly tied to the social studies curriculum—most often in history or civics-related courses. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in its document, *Including the Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum: A Position Statement and Guidelines*, states, "Knowledge about religions is

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not only a characteristic of an educated person, but is also necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity."

Guidelines for Effective, Constitutional Instruction about Religion. While several sets of guidelines for teaching about religion in the schools have been developed by professional organizations and school systems, one of the most useful is a report, *Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers*, issued by the Americans United Research Foundation (1988). One major aspect of the report is a set of guidelines that distinguish between constitutionally approved teaching about religion and unconstitutional religious indoctrination. They are summarized below:

- The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
- The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any one religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the practice of religion.
- The school exposes students to a diversity of religious views; it does not impose any particular view.
- The school educates about all religions; it does not promote or denigrate any religion.
- The school informs students about various beliefs; it does not seek to conform students to any particular belief.

Instructional Strategies for Teaching about Religion. Students (and their parents) should know that religion is an important part of the curriculum. Several approaches used by teachers and curriculum designers have produced successful results.

• **Natural Inclusion.** Religion should be studied in its historical and cultural context. History, as well as art, literature, and music, provide ample opportunities to include the study of religion. In addition, examination of local communities and religious festivals and holidays can help students realize that there is wide diversity of religious thought, and to see the differences and similarities between religions in their historical and modern contexts.

• **Fairness and Balance.** Classroom discussions must be free of advocacy on the part of teachers and students. Various perspectives should be presented, but no religious or anti-religious points of view should be advocated by the teacher. Fair and balanced study must include critical thinking about religion in relation to contemporary issues and historical events.

• **Respect for Differences.** Religious differences should not be ignored by presenting all religions as basically the same. Neither should religious faith be explained as merely a sociological or psychological phenomenon. Teachers can explain theories of religion and teach the social, economic, and political context of various religious events, but it is essential to see how religious groups interpret their own faith and practices.

• **Use of Religious Scriptures.** One of the best ways to have students see religious traditions through the eyes of their adherents is to use excerpts from religious scriptures. These documents provide a foundation for understanding the culture and history of many groups. Just as the *Bible* is essential for understanding Christianity, for example, the *Qur'an* provides knowledge of Islam. Students should also learn that differing interpretations of religious scriptures exist within major religious groups and that these differences have led to major historical events, such as the Protestant Reformation or the Islamic schism that occurred after the death of Mohammed.

• **Role Playing.** Role playing should not be used as a method of teaching about religion. Such activities, no matter how well-intentioned, may lead to stereotyping and oversimplification. They also may violate the conscience of students asked to play roles in a group with different religious traditions than their own. Instead, primary documents, audio-visual sources, or classroom guests can provide students with first-hand knowledge about religious beliefs and practices.

Linking Instruction about Religion to Civic Education. A recent trend in instruction about religion is to link it to civic or citizenship education. The religious liberties guaranteed by the Constitution's First Amendment are part of the basic civic values of American citizenship. When we teach about the many cultures and religions of our nation and the world, we must also teach the shared civic values and responsibilities of the U.S. democratic tradition. One widely used religious liberty curriculum states that these values are so fundamental and enduring that they may be called the three R's of religious liberty. They are rights, responsibilities, and respect.

• **Rights:** Religious liberty is a basic and inalienable right founded on the inviolable dignity of the person. In a society as religiously diverse as the United States, it is essential that schools emphasize that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution are for citizens of all faiths.

• **Responsibilities:** Religious liberty is not only a universal right, but it depends on a universal responsibility to respect that right for others. Students must understand the inseparable link between the preservation of their own constitutional rights and their responsibility as citizens to protect the rights of others.

• **Respect:** Debate and disagreement are vital to effective social studies instruction and are a major element in the preparation of students for citizenship. Yet, in a pluralistic society, how we debate and disagree is crucial. Good citizenship implies a commitment to civic values that enable people with diverse religious and philosophical perspectives to treat each other with respect and civility.

Note: This ERIC Digest is a modified and up-dated version of ERIC Digest EDO-SO-88-7, which was issued in August 1988.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through interlibrary loan, or ordered through UMI or ISI reprint services.

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